



## KONYĀGAR

**KONYĀGAR** (MPers. *huniyāgar* < *huniyāg* ‘delightful’, Pers. *ḵonyāgar*, from *ḵonyā* ‘song, melody’), entertainer, instrumentalist, minstrel, singer.

The term *huniyāgar* appears in the Middle Persian text *Ḵusraw ī Kawādān ud rēdak-ēw*. Classified within the *andarz* genre, this narrative recounts a dialogue between a king and a young page, who provides entertaining answers to questions about princely education. To the ninth question of the king as to which *huniyāgar*, or entertainer, is the most pleasant and best, the page lists a number of string, wind, and percussion instrumentalists, such as harp, flute, and tambourine players. He further expands the list with a catalogue detailing the performances of various entertainers, including jugglers, acrobats, and animal trainers. He concludes that: “no entertainment can compete with the one provided by the beautiful harp player of the harem who has a clear and sweet voice” (Monchi-Zadeh 1982, 75–77, sect 60–63, Azarnouch, 2013, 57; see [MUSIC HISTORY](#)). In Ṭa‘ālebi’s version of this passage (Al-Tha‘ālibī, ed. and tr. Zotenberg, 1900, 709–10), these entertainers are absent; only four musical instruments and three musical modes (Isfahan, Nehāvand, Nishapur), not found in the Middle Persian text, are mentioned.

Performing entertainers were essential at gatherings of kings and nobles, and numerous descriptions of such events appear in classical Persian literature. In addition to *ḵonyāgar*, terms such as *čāma-gu* (singer of odes; poet), *gōsān*, and *rāmešgar* (minstrel) also appear. In her study “The Parthian ‘Gōsān’”, [Mary Boyce](#) presented a detailed picture of the social setting of literature in pre-Islamic Iran. She demonstrated that the minstrel was the principal figure in



the realm of poetry, which before the coming of Islam was an oral tradition in Iran (Boyce, 1957, 10–45).

The 12th-century anonymous chronicle, the *Mojmal al-tawāriḵ wa'l-qeṣaṣ*, recounts that the Sasanian king *Bahrām V Gōr* (r. 420–38 CE), attentive to his subjects' well-being, observed that people lacked *rāmešgar* to perform during their wine-drinking. He wrote to the king of India, requesting *gōsāns*; the author explains that “in the Pahlavi language *gōsān* means *konyāgar*.” This request led to the arrival of twelve thousand Indian musicians, both men and women. The king provided them with a salary and mounts, stipulating that they would provide free music for the poor (*Mojmal al-tawāriḵ wa'l-qeṣaṣ*, ed. Bahār, 1318 /1939, 69; Mohl, 1841, 515–16).

According to Boyce, the *konyāgar*, like the *gōsān*, inherited a body of traditional material upon which they could improvise. They also contributed original poems of varied character, sung to instrumental accompaniment on occasions, such as the *Nowruz* and *Mehragān* festivals or state banquets (Boyce, 1957, 27).

The medieval authors record the names of a few minstrels, the most famous being *Bārbad*, a minstrel-poet at the court of the Sasanian king *Kosrow II* (r. 590–628 CE). Many compositions are attributed to him, including *Haft Kosravāni*, the seven musical/royal modes. According to the *Tāriḵ-e Sistān*, “it was Persians for whom [verses] were first recited with string accompaniment on the ‘royal modes’ ” (*Tāriḵ-e Sistān*, ed. Bahār, 1935/2020, 215). Although the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iran gradually separated the roles of poet and musician, the importance of sung poetry remained strong throughout the Persianate world, with poets frequently continuing to serve as musicians, and vice versa (Mallāḥ 1965 [1984]; Idem, 1972 [1985]; Lewis, 1995)

Minstrels were an essential part of the ancient Iranian royal tradition of the feast (*bazm*) held in conjunction with warfare (*razm*), major themes in the *Šāh-nāma*. A *bazm* could be organized for specific occasions in private life, on the fixed dates of great celebrations, or on the eve of major military engagements. When *Goštāsp* celebrates the return of his son *Esfandiār* after he accomplishes seven feats (*haft k'vān*), he orders a public celebration: the entire capital is decorated, and requests are made for wine (*mey*), music (*rud*), and musicians (*rāmešgarān*) (ed. Khaleghi, vol. V, 287, line 821; Melikian-Chirvani, 1992, 98–99).



Minstrels, poets, and performers held a high status at court and could be elevated to the prestigious position of *nadim* (boon companion) of the ruler, as were [Bāmšād](#), Bārbad, and Nakisā at the court of [Kosrow II](#). In his *History*, [Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqī](#) describes how Sultan Mas'ud I (r. 1030–40) traveled on the Oxus ([Āmu Daryā](#)) in the company of boats filled with his boon companions, musicians, singers, and *gōlāms* (Bayhaqī, I, tr. Bosworth, 342–43).

In Mazdakite theology, Joy (*sorur*) is one of the four spiritual forces governing the world, represented by the *rāmešgar* “entertainment master.” According to [Šahrastānī](#) (*Al-Shahrastānī*, 1846, 193), the Supreme Being is seated on his throne in the world above, attended by four powers—Discernment, Understanding, Preservation, and Joy—just as the king of kings below is attended by the chief judge, chief religious doctor, commander of the army, and entertainment master (Yarshater, 1983, 1006).

The minstrel also served as a messenger between court and king, capable of conveying truths that others dared not express openly. When Šabdēz, the favorite horse of [Kosrow II](#), died, no one dared inform the king; Bārbad composed and sang a poem communicating the news (Browne, 1899, 58–59; [Ebn Kordāqbeh](#), 1964, 16). Similarly, [Rudaki](#) famously composed a song recalling Bukhara to persuade the Samanid ruler Naṣr b. Aḥmad to abandon Herat and return home ([Nezāmi 'Aruzi](#), tr. Browne, 1921, 32–33).

A minstrel also served as a medium to convey emotions and secrets of characters in narratives through music and poetry. In [Nezāmi's Kosrow o Širin](#), [Kosrow](#) asks Bārbad to provide music to alleviate the pain caused by Širin's absence (I, p. 227). In the famous scene where [Kosrow](#) and Širin express their feelings for one another, the court minstrels Bārbad and Nakisā exchange verses on their behalf, accompanying their songs with the lute (*barbaṭ*) and the harp (*čang*), respectively. According to Stephen Blum, the “two musicians alternately perform verses in a coherent sequence of eight modes [...] in order to express the changing emotions signaled to them by [Kosrow](#) and Širin,” concluding with “two ‘soft’ modes associated with passion” (Blum, 2013, 117).

In the poetry of [Hafez](#), the most common terms for minstrel, musician, and/or singer are the Arabic terms *moṭreb* and *moğanni*, as exemplified in the following lines (*ğazal* 123 and “*Sāqi-nāma*,” respectively): moṭreb-e 'ešq 'ajab sāz o navā'i dārad / naqš-e har nağma ke zad rāh be jāyi dārad (what a [pleasant] instrument and melody the minstrel of love has [played] / each song



that he/she plays is in different modes (for various interpretations of this line, see Mallāḥ, 1984, 216 and note 1); moğanni navā-ye ʔarab sāz kon / be qol o ġazal qeṣṣa āġāz kon (O musician, play the mode of delight / with a song and a ġazal start the tale).

Arabic and Persian literature and treatises offer abundant advice on the expected behavior of musicians. Rudaki advises that the best thing for minstrelsy (ḳonyāgari) is to gladden the heart: be ḳonyāgari naġz āvarad ruy / ke čizi ke del ḳoṣ konad ān beguy (With minstrelsy, cultivate excellence / say something that makes the heart happy).

Musical treatises, such as those of Ṣafi-al-Din Ormawi (d. 1294) and ‘Abd-al-Qāder Marāġi (d. 1435) often discuss in their conclusions (*ḳātima*) and other writings the proper behavior of musicians and their appropriate choice of mode (*parda*), noting that modes have different effects on different classes of people. In the *Qābus-nāma*, Kaykāvus b. Eskandar presents the rituals and customs inherent to the profession of entertainer/musician (*dar ā’in va rasm-e ḳonyāgari*): “If you become a *ḳonyāgar*, be sweet-tempered and light of spirit; keep your garments clean, fragrant and perfumed (...) It is unsuitable always to play in one style, for not all men have the same character; exert yourself to become a *raconteur*; by telling a number of stories, witticisms and jests you can rest yourself and so diminish the strain of minstrelsy, etc.” (Kaykāvus, ed. Yusofi, 1345 /1966, 193-97; Kaykāvus, tr. Levy, 1951, 186-90).

The traditional role of the poet-musician has survived in Iran to the present day. The contemporary *Ḳorāsāni baḳṣi*, Turkmen *baġṣy*, and Azerbaijani *āṣeq* are professional or semi-professional performers with large repertoires of narratives, many of whom, like the *gōsān* or *ḳonyāgar*, are poet-musicians capable of composing songs and singing or reciting them with instrumental accompaniment (for examples, see Youssefzadeh and Blum).

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